

Growing up, I remember writing a wish list for Christmas each year. My sister and brother and I would look at the enormous toy catalogs from J. C. Penney and Sears and pick out all the things we thought we wanted, and then write them all out and put the list on the fridge. Some things were reasonable, but often there was some pretty outlandish stuff that made it on there.

So come Christmas morning when we'd open gifts, we didn't get everything on our lists. Yet we were rarely, if ever, disappointed, and if we were, it was only for a short time. Why? Because what my parents and others gave us as gifts was so much better.

Dad and Mom in their wisdom refrained from buying things that were obvious fads that would be gone before the month was out. They didn't get those gifts that would quickly break or be used once and then forgotten. No, because my parents knew me so well, and knew what was truly good and useful for me, they'd ignore many of my foolish requests and give gifts that were much better, and which ended up bringing me a lot more joy.

This idea of not getting what you ask for but instead being given something much better is seen in our Gospel text, and it's something that this season of Advent seeks to remind us of each year.

The Jews of Jesus' day had a gift they were hoping for from God, and it's one they'd been hoping and asking for for a long time. It's the gift they're hoping for on that Sunday when Jesus rides into Jerusalem. They're hoping for the Messiah.

Just listen to their words, their shouts, as Jesus approaches the city on a donkey. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" These cheers are full of Messianic language.

"Hosanna" means "Save, now," or "Please save us." Who would be the Savior of Israel? The promised Messiah! They confess Jesus to be the "Son of David." King David had a lot of physical descendants, enough to fill up all the inns of Bethlehem during Caesar Augustus's census. But there was just one who was the Son of David – the Messiah!

The Messiah's coming would be so great because He would wield the very authority of the Lord – Yahweh; hence their cries about Him coming in the name of the Lord. This work of the Messiah would be brought about from the highest powers of heaven – Hosanna in the highest! Everything the crowds are crying out is proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah they've been longing for.

Now, was this desire for the Messiah an unreasonable one? No! In fact, it was promised repeatedly by God in the Scriptures.

When the Lord was declaring to Adam and Eve the tragic effects of their rebellion against Him, He shows mercy by promising to come and restore them to Himself. Later on, God chooses Abraham and gives him the promise that in one of his descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Still later, God speaks through Moses and says that He will raise up another prophet who will speak God's Word to His people. Centuries later, the Lord promises to King David that He will establish a son of David on the throne of a kingdom that will last forever.

Generations after that, the Lord declares through the prophet Isaiah that He will send a servant who will suffer for the transgressions of all and by His suffering make many righteous. Through another prophet, Jeremiah, the Lord gave the promise we heard today, that He would raise up a king who would bring security and righteousness.

There are plenty of other promises given in the Old Testament concerning this coming one, but the people of Israel rightly understood that they were all about the coming Messiah. And so they waited and waited for this Messiah's appearance.

The problem was, as they waited and waited, their eyes went away from the promises given in God's Word and toward the nations around them and the stuff they had. Like spending too long looking at toy catalogs will give a child an incorrect idea of what would actually be a good gift, the increasingly worldly focus of the people of Israel warped their understanding of who the Messiah would be and what He would do.

They looked at the power of the empires who conquered them, and rather than seeing them as instruments of discipline sent to bring them to repentance, they saw them as power to be idolized. Surely the Messiah's kingdom, being from God, would have even more earthly power than Persia, Greece, or Rome.

They looked at the prosperity of worldly kingdoms and figured that, as the Lord had granted Solomon riches back in their "good old days," surely He'd grant even more riches through the Messiah.

They saw the great empire of Rome as having stability – even as they resented it – hearing of how the empire could provide free grain for its people from Egypt, and they longed for a Messiah who would rain bread from heaven just like in the wilderness. This is why they want to forcibly seize Jesus and make Him king after He feeds the five thousand.

Even Jesus' own disciples aren't immune from these worldly desires, looking for Him to restore the earthly kingdom.

But these earthly desires are not why Jesus has come. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

But He is not riding into Jerusalem to throw out the Romans and begin expanding a Davidic kingdom by force of arms. He hasn't come to fill Jerusalem with silver and gold, but will be scattering the wealth of the money-changers as He throws them out of the temple. He has come to bring bread from heaven, though it's not manna, but rather His own body. No, as He will state while standing before Pontius Pilate beaten and bloody, His kingdom is not of this world.

Jesus is coming into Jerusalem to bring the true gifts that the Messiah was promised to give. He was there to gather people into the Kingdom of Heaven, a Kingdom that is eternal. He was there to bring the riches of forgiveness, something no amount of gold or silver could ever purchase, but only His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

He came to Jerusalem for one last Passover, to be the final, perfect Passover Lamb. He was there to free not from foreign occupation but from slavery to sin and death.

He was there to bring gifts beyond what the people could truly imagine, much, much better than their own ideas of what the Messiah should do. And such is the incredible mercy of God that He gave these gifts even to a people who didn't understand it. He died for those crowds who were crying out "Hosanna!" one moment and "Crucify Him!" the next. He did this because He knew the gifts that they truly needed.

We need to look at those crowds crying out on Palm Sunday and reflect on our own desires for what we want God to, what we think are the important things God should give to us. We look around the world and, like the Israelites, we desire the things of the world and want God to give us those blessings because we're His people.

We want Jesus to grant us popularity, to be respected and well-thought-of in society, longing to return to our "good old days" when being at least a nominal Christian opened doors in society rather than closed them.

We want Jesus to free us from worry and anxiety, and we want Him to do this by filling our bank accounts and giving us good insurance and matched retirement plans, rather than the strong faith to follow Him even if it means losing all our worldly possessions.

We want Jesus to bring peace in our lives, but we want this in the earthly "everybody just getting along" superficial peace, rather than the peace that requires humbling ourselves beneath His Word and finding true peace and unity there.

We want a Messiah who is love, but "love" as we see it, not love as God defines it.

We want a Messiah whom we will always understand and agree with, rather than a Messiah whose Word we must grasp by faith, even when it goes against our feelings or reason.

We want a Messiah who will teach us, but whose Word we never need to spend considerable time and effort studying.

We, like the Jews in our reading, and people of all time, want a Messiah who will reflect our image, rather than one who will remake us in His image.

These warped desires, and whatever other ones we have, are not hidden from God. He knows our inmost thoughts and longings perfectly, just as He knew the thoughts and longings of those in the crowds as He entered into Jerusalem.

And in mercy, He comes to us anyways. He comes bringing gifts that have eternal value, treasures that will not rust or fade away or be replaced by the next big thing that comes along.

He comes to bring forgiveness. This is sometimes a gift we don't want, because it requires us to repent, to admit in our hearts that we were wrong, and to cast ourselves at His feet. Just like a gift you get that you're not really excited about at first but then realize just how great it is the more you use it, forgiveness is a gift for which we grow in appreciation. As we grow to know just what it means to be forgiven, that God remembers our sins no more, that there is nothing standing between us and His perfect love, forgiveness is a gift we cherish more every day.

In addition to that gift, Jesus also comes to bring life. For those joined to Him by repentance and faith, death is totally defeated. When you were baptized, your sinful self was drowned, and new and everlasting life was given to you. You can't truly die.

Yes, at some point your body and soul will be separated in bodily death. But when that happens, your soul goes to rest in the absolute peace and joy of Christ's presence. Whatever good you've experienced in this life, your absolute best moments here will absolutely pale in comparison with even one second spent in the presence of our Lord and God.

Whatever joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, love, friendship, belonging, whatever it is that we would say makes life good, those are magnified a thousandfold for those living in the presence of the Most High. And all those effects of sin that make this life hard, such as pain, fear, worry, disappointment, loneliness, anger, suffering, sadness, they are all totally and completely gone, banished from the new heavens and new earth, never to return. Jesus has come to grant life, eternal life, to the full.

These are the gifts which Jesus has come to bring. These are the gifts He has won for us by His cross and resurrection. The world directs us to all sorts of temporary things, fleeting pleasures, treasures whose value quickly fades. The Lord comes to give gifts that never fade away.

As we enter into this holy season of Advent, a season of waiting, of repentance, let us seek to refocus on the things of God, that which really matters. Let us look faithfully for the coming Messiah, who comes to give us the true, best, and eternal gifts.

In the name of Jesus, the Son of David, amen.